VIABLE SEED

A collection of Short Stories

by

Robert King Meredith

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VIABLE SEED

A Collection of Short Stories

by

Robert King Meredith

(B.S., Texas A. and M. College, 1946)
submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
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INTRODUCTION

One of the stories in this collection does not fall into the general grouping; however, all have certain salient features that are similar. The collection taken as a whole interests itself in the creation of the hard brilliant core of character as economically as possible. No glittering facets of poetic prose, appeals to the sense of the esthetic, or clever tricks of rhetoric present themselves to supplement the avowed purpose; if that fails, all fails. External event, action, environmental scene--all are relegated to roles in revealing character. None of the characters moves in a vacuum of pure thought. Action of the world around them and their own action unite in forcing them onward. Often the blending of these two types of action forces them in directions where they do not care to go--such is life. Let no one detect a crusader in the author --to convey awareness is his sole objective--realism without cant.

With the exception of "Shepherd Under the Ale-Stake" the stories deal with a segment of our population heretofore hardly noticed in the printed page. These people are the hybrid result of an intermingling of Western and Southern types--the people of the western fringe of the cotton belt. The land is not marginal land that tapers off into a ranch and grazing economy, but a black soil of limestone base that, when properly taken care of and under favorable circumstances, can outdo the greater part of the cotton belt. However, climate is not always kind to the farmer--excessive spring rains, dry summers, and hordes of

insects often make his task seem hopeless. Many of the tillers of the soil become hardened and almost inhuman from the fierce struggle they engage in. These conditions have made drudges out of some and farmer-capitalists out of others. Most of these farmer-capitalists were outgrowths of their environment--they came up the hard way. Almost superhuman drive and unscrupulous methods have helped them to amass large tracts of land that they farm scientifically and make pay. If they must pay the large number of day laborers necessary to the growing of cotton too little to exist on to make the land pay, putting the place on a paying basis is naturally more important than having a population weakened by pellagra. But these men form the upper strata of the social soil. Under them are the many smaller land-holders who stiffen the social structure from top to bottom. The tenant farmers and day laborers are still farther down in the social soil, and although large in mass they exert little influence on what meets the eye of he who watches the surface.

Although German and Bohemian farmers appear in the group of smaller land-holders, there is a good solid base of one hundred per cent Anglo-Saxon southern protestant citizens. They have successfully (or at least totally) imposed their mores on the entire population. There has been little questioning of their Negro codes. Since a large part of the population came from Germany, Bohemia, and Free Soil, U.S.A., you may ask how the creed of racial intolerance was so easily forced on them. Forced? Nay, not so--it was a halter that most wore well. Newcomers from all parts rather relished the idea of arriving with

a place prepared for them above the bottom of the social ladder. Perhaps complacency had a great part in this acceptance. So many of us prefer to accept society as we find it--not to make a spectacle of ourselves by being different--it might cost us something.

Morals! Ah, there is nothing so up-lifting as good old one hundred per cent Anglo-Saxon protestant morals. All week long the pillars of the church cheat, lie and steal in their businesses and farms; then piously pass the collection plate on Sundays. They denounce the use of alcohol and deplore their daughters' dancing, but the patriarchs visit regularly their Negro mistresses while their wives keep the wheels of the malicious mill of rumor rotating rapidly. The women contribute regularly to their church missionary movements to civilize and Christianize the heathen Chinese or the Catholic Brazilian while they pay their Negro washerwomen twenty-five cents for a washing that takes all day and do not worry about her religion.

Another good Anglo-Saxon tradition is that of having Negroes do most of the work whether such a small land-holder can afford it or not. Supervising is necessary of course, but any hot day in July is likely to find a group of red-white men playing croquet at some crossroad country store--enjoying the leisure that is a white man's due--while an investigation of assets would reveal a heavy mortgage on the farm, payment due on the new tractor and no funds to pay--enough to make any clear-thinking man think that the person investigated should be back at the farm on his tractor instead of the hired Negro who is

there.

In this sunny Anglo-Saxon land a sector of southern womanhood in the shape of four daughters keep their lily-white hands lily white and their peach-blossom cheeks peach blossom in the darkened coolness of the farmhouse--not a very large farmhouse, nor a very large farm--one hundred and fifty acres--while the father toils in the mid-day sun and laments that he has not four sons to help him save the farm. And all the time in his vision lies the solution--an old German settler with some of his "furrin" ways, across the road with his six daughters--red-faced strong and working. All he sees is an odd foreigner who doesn't care for his "place". If he only fully realized what the "place" of a farmer of his holdings was.

The Bohemian and German immigrants have clung tightly to reality--aware of what houses they could build, what cars they could buy, but always knowing that every individual must work. He has seldom become a slave to installment buying. They would serve as examples to much of the native stock if the native stock could imagine anybody having better ways of doing things than themselves.

The native stock, the proud Anglo-Saxon, is savagely independent. He maintains his right to deplete the soil, to starve in his own way. The great experiment of the New Deal in agriculture he often met with denunciation. Terracing, soil-building crops, crop rotation, diversification, he denounced as worthless, hair-brained experimentation of wild-eyed, Bureaucratic radicals. It was almost a hand-out--a worthwhile one--

that many refused to accept. From their ranks came a few men who awakened to reality and seized the economic opportunity to the extent of breaking into the land-holder class, for that group drew from all the elements of the population, save, of course, the Negro.

What of the tenant farmers and day laborers? The majority of the day laborers are Negroes, the tenants, whites, with a liberal sprinkling of both in each. The government agricultural experiment had good intentions in regard to the tenant farmer, but the intention backfired and threw most of them into the day-laborer class. The large land-owners found it more expedient to fleece the government without being hampered by tenants in the way. The lot of the day laborer in the cotton belt is not one to be envied. It is an existence of unadulterated poverty. Of coursethere is the distinction of white poverty and black poverty but what joy there is in that, to the whites, is a flimsy substitute for an ample diet.

The surprising sum total of this is not that brutality grows out of such life, but that some people emerge with a view that is in focus and a character of any intrinsic value. Men in defeat but with the germ of humanity are Viable Seed.

WITH HIS SHIELD

The man who met Joe at the bus didn't look at all like his dad, Jim Powers. It didn't take a second look to tell him that Jim was a shell of his former self. He had written that he'd been ill, but Joe wasn't looking for this. The great hulk of a man who had represented such massive strength--like a wrestler--and who had always been so jovial, now appeared to be an impotent mass of flabby fat, his fleshy face drooping sadly.

"Howdy, Son." Jim's voice sounded grave and tired.

"Howdy, Dad."

"We worried about you."

"Well, I'm home now." Joe was twenty-two, and still looked young in spite of two years of hard life in the field. His face was tanned and seemed to have the dirt of many bivouacs indelibly ingrained into the skin. His hair was slightly curly and bristly, showing the effect of little combing.

Joe waited nervously--what was he going to say when Jim started asking him what the fighting was like? When he first reached the States, he had felt a desire to talk about combat, but all he had managed to tell in chance encounters with civilians since his return had sounded very flat and unreal to himself. It was with dread that he anticipated the questions of his dad. He need not have worried--now that he was home Jim no longer thought of the war.

Joe looked at the pick-up truck. It had been new when

he left; now it looked a wreck. Why was it like that? Jim had always kept his machinery in good shape--it seemed to have gone the way he had gone physically.

"Would you like to drive, Joe?"

"Sure, Dad."

The door on the driver's side was wired shut, so Joe had to slide across from the other door. The starter did not turn the engine over readily, and when it did, he noticed that one cylinder missed firing.

The condition of Jim and the car worried Joe. As far back as Normandy--in the hedge rows, he had worried about the farm. He had received letters telling him the farm was in bad shape. Then this spring after the crossing of the Rhine, he had worried about the troubles over spring planting.

"How're the crops, Dad?"

"Not very good, Son."

Things were bad. Maybe he should have stayed home. He remembered the scene that had passed when he told Jim that he wanted to go to the army. He had said, "Dad, I'm eighteen--I guess I'll be getting into the army pretty soon."

"Why son, I reckon I felt about the same way you do back in '17, but Ma was a widow woman and I had to stay and keep the farm going," Jim had said. He was usually jovial, but he was not jovial now. He was very serious--the way he was usually serious when Joe's mother was around--Joe knew his dad was going to put up a fight to try to get him to stay.

"Well, I don't have to worry about that--I reckon you can

do pretty well without me."

"You oughta figure it on your worth. Now, are you going to be worth more as an insignificant cog in a big machine or be a big wheel in an essential industry? There's things just as important as fighting--why we'll be feeding our allies as well as ourselves, and where'd our munitions industries be without cotton? It's easy to go off and join the army, but it takes a lot to see that you'll be doing more good by staying here."

"I know all of that," said Joe, "but you'll get along o.k. --and they say that farm boys make the best soldiers in the world. Why, what if all farm boys didn't go?"

"Son, let's go down and talk to the draft board--we can get you a deferment for being in an essential industry. Why, if you went off to the army, they might put you behind a desk like Bob Ward's boy. Why, a WAC could be doing his work, and there's Bob just crying for labor on his farm."

"But I won't be like that--he had a rupture--that's the reason they put him on limited service. It's only right that I go. I couldn't be staying with most of the boys that're any good away fighting. Think what it'd be like when they came back--and me not having been out of Freestone County."

"Why, it ain't the same at all," said Jim. "That Whitney boy that's getting deferred never hit a lick in his life till the draft came along. Now he putters around with that tractor like he was a regular farmer. It'd be different for you--everybody knows that you've always worked hard on the farm."

"That's the reason everybody'd be disappointed in me if I was a slacker," said Joe.

"There's that boy of Fritz Schneider's, Rudolf, who's got two deferments. Nobody says much about him even if he is German--he's a hard worker. I know you admire him--you two are always consulting on farming. I just don't know how I'm going to get on without you, Son."

"Why, you'll have Cora's two boys, Luke and Ananias to help you around the barn--they're fine Nigger boys, and you could always get field hands when anybody could," said Joe.

Cora had lived on the farm for fifteen years, and had helped his mother around the house. Her two boys were big enough to help with the milking and feeding the livestock.

"I'll have that help," said Jim, "but the field hands'll all be going to work in war plants. It's going to be tough."

Joe had looked up to see his mother standing in the door--they had been talking on the wide front gallery of the large white farmhouse. She stepped out on the covered porch, saying, "Sure, Cora and her two boys can take your place around the house, Joe." There was a note of sarcasm in her voice--she often used it around his father. She seldom seemed warm to him--she must have been the type of Spartan mother who said to her son on departing for war, "Come home with your shield or on your shield." Did she actually want him to go? Joe remembered when she had been laughing and always full of fun. She and Jim used to be constantly joking with each other--but that had been so long ago--he could hardly remember when--now in its

place was this cold biting tongue and she hardly ever smiled. Her features were tired, her hair streaked with gray.

His mother--why hadn't she come down to meet him: "Where's Ma?"

"She couldn't come down--some of her pullets have limber-neck and she's doctoring them," said Jim.

Why had she got so she didn't like Cora?--of course in the old days she seemed to like everybody. Cora's two bastards might have turned her against her--her man never did live there regular. What the hell, though--Niggers couldn't afford the money to get a divorce if they weren't happy with their marriage--so they just don't get married in the first place. He guessed his ma didn't figure it that way--she was a pretty strong church goer.

He turned to Jim again: "How're Cora and her boys?" asked Joe.

"You know that Nigger bitch up and moved out on me after all these years," said Jim. "I wrote you about the government giving so much to the Niggers for each bastard."

"Yes, but I didn't get it. What's the basis for it?--that was the first I'd heard of it."

"They just pay 'em for having bastards, and they won't work--that and these Eleanor Roosevelt Clubs. Why just the other day Mrs Whitney went down to Niggertown and asked a Nigger girl who used to work for her if she'd do a washing for her, and she says, 'I don't do no work for white folks no more--I belong to the Eleanor Club.' Why, young Nigger boys that

went in the army would claim that some old Nigger woman with five children was his woman and they'd get quite a bit of allotment money."

"Oh, so that's what it is. That's just a regular soldier's allotment. They get it whether they're legally married or not --they give it to whites too," said Joe.

"Well, Cora got allotments for herself and those two boys from Ollie Brown and she hasn't lived with him over two months all told, if you counted up all the times he was around for a few days. Why, those boys might not even be his. It's just subsidizing bastardry--that's all it is."

"I guess you can look at it that way," said Joe, his experience in the army giving him a somewhat more cosmopolitan viewpoint on Negroes--and besides this wasn't the bitter sort of denunciation that was to be expected from Jim.

As they neared the Powers' farm they passed the Schneider place. "Looks like the Schneiders have been keeping up the home front--that's a fine crop of cotton they've got there. Seems Fritz really kept the place in good shape. I guess it helped a lot having Rudy around."

"If that Rudy hadn't been always stealing my labor, I'd have been in good shape. Couldn't get a hired hand before he'd come along and steal him. I don't think it was right--these Germans right here among us making money hand over fist while we're fighting their country. I don't know but what they been committing sabotage in our midst. If folks like them keep on they'll win the war by taking over this country from inside--

even if they did get whipped over in Europe. They have these big families--why old man Schneider has five girls--every one of 'em out in the field when the rush season was on. Most of these good old Anglo-Saxon families keep their women folk in the house. Yep, looks mighty like the Niggers and the Germans are going to take us over while we get killed fighting for the country. Why, if you'd been here we would have had the place in better shape than the Schneiders."

Jim's face had grown flushed over his long tirade. "It sure isn't like Dad," thought Joe. Just then he saw the farm. The cotton wasn't a good stand--long skips where there was no cotton at all. The cotton and the corn were almost choked out by a rank growth of weeds.

"It looks pretty bad, Dad."

"I know, Son--but I think if I give it another plowing, I'll get my full insurance--they docked me twenty per cent last year for not working it enough."

This wasn't the old Jim at all--he'd never known him to get crop insurance before--much less get docked on it.

II

Joe walked across the corn patch and cut out into the twenty acre field of cotton that was adjacent to the Schneider place. It hurt him to see the difference between this field and that of the Schneiders' just across the wide drainage ditch. He would have to take things in hand--Jim wasn't the manager he once was, and the way he talked about the Schneiders and Cora--it was almost crack-pot. Oh well, he could get things

in good shape by next year. As he walked along the edge of the drainage ditch he could see that their side of the ditch was almost choked with weeds--the Schneiders', well-kept. It was the last place Jim would have fallen down--where it was sharing a responsibility.

When Joe had reached home the day before, he found things run down worse than he had anticipated. There were old friends he would like to see, but he was ashamed to see anybody until he got the farm into better shape. His mother looked much older and very worn. Her greeting was unenthusiastic--although he had always felt that she loved him in spite of her outward coldness--she must be glad to see him back. The livestock were gone--the beef cattle, the hogs, the sheep, and the milk cows, except for one old cow--a good milker, but Joe thought he could see his way through.

He looked up to see a figure cutting diagonally across the Schneiders' field. It looked like Rudy Schneider--he wasn't sure--it had been almost three years since he had seen Rudy. What Jim had said yesterday didn't influence Joe's thinking about the Schneiders. His pride was a little hurt at being so far outstripped at farming--there had always been a good-natured rivalry between the adjacent farms--in which the Powers' farm was on top more often than not. His good opinion of the Schneiders, he knew, had been formed partially by his dad in the days before the war; however, he could not turn off his good will simply because his dad had grown bitter during his absence. He remembered Rudy with a feeling of

friendship--they had often talked crops together and gone swimming in the creek--this in spite of a feeling of misgiving about Rudy's conduct during the war. Rudy hadn't been drafted. Why had he stood behind his occupation when the rest of the farm boys had gone? Could it be that they were still pro-German after three generations in America? Old Uncle Billy Schneider had been outspokenly pro-German just before the first World War. At church the German atrocities in Belgium had been discussed. They had asked Uncle Billy if he had anything further to add. He had stood up and said, "I tink enuff haf been said alreddy." But he had spent his boyhood in the Rhineland. These questions presented themselves in a flash, and were gone as suddenly.

"Hi, Rudy," he yelled.

Rudy looked up, puzzled a moment then waved. He started over. As he neared Joe could see his flaming red face. He never could take a tan.

"Well, well, you're looking good," said Rudy, grasping Joe's hand tightly.

"It's really good to see you again," said Joe, momentarily forgetting his troubled thoughts in the warmth of the greeting.

"You know you're the fourth in our bunch to get back. Roy Bunch, Jim Cavener and Joe Chunn are back," said Rudy.

"I haven't had a chance to see anybody since I got home--just got in yesterday," said Joe.

"I was thinking about coming over," said Rudy. "I heard

you were back, down at the drugstore in town."

"I was planning on looking everybody up soon as I got used to being home."

"You all really did a grand job over there. I certainly wish I could have been in on it," said Rudy. Joe looked directly into Rudy's pale blue eyes and kept looking as Rudy's shifted to the drainage ditch: "We're off. Here comes the stay-at-home's reason why he didn't go. What am I supposed to say? If I say, 'It's too bad,' that would make him angry because he'd think it was sarcastic, and if I say, 'You didn't miss anything,' it belittles what I've done and I'll be damned if I'll do that to make a 4-F happy." Joe felt that it was just another one of the dilemmas that were surrounding him since he arrived home. In his indecision he said nothing.

After an awkward silence Rudy continued: "Father was in too poor health to manage the farm, and the girls couldn't handle it, so that didn't leave me any choice--I had to stay."

"How <u>is</u> your father?" asked Joe.

Rudy chose to overlook the sarcasm: "About as well as ever."

Joe felt hurt that his insult was ignored. He felt like saying, "As well as when you were born and you know it." But what was he saying? Rudy's old man might have been in pretty bad shape--if Joe had known what was going to happen to their place, he would have stayed--and after all, wasn't it a sort of youthful desire for glory, a glory that he hadn't found, that shoved him off instead of real patriotism. To Rudy he

said, "My Dad hasn't been doing too well."

"I know," said Rudy.

"I wish you could have helped him some," said Joe.

"God knows, I tried."

"He says he couldn't get any labor."

"I tried to help him get some, but he got so darn grouchy none of um ud stay. Even Cora said she couldn't stand to be round him any more--she said, 'Mr. Jim sho doan hab no mo' dat murth he use to have.'"

"Did Cora work over on your place?"

"Yes, just--"

"So what he said was right--you did steal his labor. I'm off fighting a war and while you're staying here getting out of it, you're stealing what little labor a sick old man could get--is that any way to treat an old friend's dad?"

"Don't talk to me like that Joe, I only got her after she moved to town and said she wouldn't work for him any more."

Joe's voice rose angrily: "No wonder Dad is sour on the world--the government subsidizes his help to move off to town and while he's still mad about it his neighbors and alleged friends run into town and haul the renegades out to work for them."

At first Rudy had been only uneasy at the turn of the conversation, but the uneasiness turned to anger as Joe continued to shout him down: "So he's been telling you how the government subsidized his bastards out from under him--he's been telling everybody else, but I thought at least he wouldn't tell you."

"What are you talking about?" Joe's anger grew still and threatening, his voice cold.

"By God, you may think I'm dirt for sitting out the war, but I haven't been made a fool of. I guess half the county knows those boys of Cora's ain't Ollie's--they're too damned white--they're your old man's--your ma's known it a long time."

The look of anger faded from Joe's eyes. His threatening look disappeared into the distance beyond Rudy, becoming a vacant stare.

Rudy became aware of the change--his anger left him--the blood fell from his face: "I'm sorry, Joe."

Joe's face looked tired--more tired than it had after the hard fighting along the Siegfried Line. Then there had been bright sparkles of hope--visions of green fields with straight rows--he and his dad growing rich crops and both being strong in their mastery of the soil. It was the bottom of a pit he had felt himself falling into since he saw Jim at the bus station--or farther than that, to the letters about troubles on the farm or, yes, that was it--the change in his mother--it must have ended her world--now he could better understand her--"It should have been on my shield."

"What's that?" asked Rudy.

"Oh--nothing--I'll get my one way plow on my side of the ditch tomorrow." He turned and walked toward the corn field.

THE FLAME THAT DIED

Oak Hill is not at all extraordinary. There are thousands of other towns of its size from one end of the country to the other. However, in one way it is quite different. In reality it is not one town at all, but two; for out of the population of twelve hundred, five hundred live as much apart as if there were an impassable barrier through the heart of the town. Endeavor, genius, piety or wit would never bring one of the five hundred across it. Some even have relatives across that barrier who, even if they want to (and they most assuredly do not), cannot bring them across. These five hundred people are of the variegated colors and anthropological types that go under the name of Negro. Years ago these Negroes gave their section of Oak Hill a different name--Freedmanville, but that was merely a faint echo of a hollow document--the Emancipation Proclamation. That document had merely changed slavery from the individual to a group basis. The economic grip that makes these men slaves is a powerful force. The separate name meant anything but autonomy, for the government of the town remained completely in the hands of the whites. Instead of a slave market in the old sense of the word, this segregated group represents a labor market where land owners come and get as many laborers as they need. They pay them enough to exist on while they are working, then in the slack farming season they leave them to their own means while they starve into an eagerness for any kind of work at any kind of wage.

Their segregation is no crime in itself, for both races

are happier living apart. In the Negro quarter there is gayety, singing, dancing, ecstasies of religion, and love; but there is not a voter, a juror, a judge, a constable, a lawyer, a member of the school board, or an alderman.

In many ways the Negro town is more interesting than the white. The houses seem to be more like living places. They are full of people; there are more people living per square foot than in the white town. Compare any of the little bee-hive boxes of activity with the old Glover place. It is set off alone in a conglomeration of arborvitae that leaves a corner of the house here and a gable there sticking up through the morass of itchy looking shrubbery. It stands so quiet and gloomy that one can hardly believe that anyone lives there. Here in the Negro quarter in the early morning of fall there are scores of men and women and children of all ages coming out of houses with sleep in their eyes and with long duck cotton sacks rolled under their arms. They carry their lunches in syrup buckets with perforations in the tops and bright paper labels depicting Brer Rabbit reared on his hind legs. They climb aboard trailers and trucks, and as the vehicles pull away, they rouse themselves with a cheery morning song. Here life seems to be always stirring.

Among this mass of vibrant disenfranchised folk came this man of learning--Frank Johnson. He had stood before the school board with determination in his heart in spite of the repeated pleas of his mother not to come south and face an impossible task of doing anything for Negro education in the face of such

men as these he now saw.

Mr. Russell, manager of the artificial ice plant mopped his sweating red face: "I see by the papers here you got your schooling at the University of New Hampshire."

"Yessuh."

"Went to school regular with white folks?"

"Yessuh."

Mr. Love, the blacksmith, licking his lower lip, asked, "White women too?"

Frank felt uneasy: "Yessuh."

Mr. Russell continued, "And went to picture shows and social gatherings too?"

"Yessuh." That's the way it had been. For a period of four years he had lived in a mixed society. He had gone to theatres, churches, athletic events where white people sat around him until it seemed almost natural. Yes, there had actually been parties--at times it almost seemed that there was a pointed effort to make him feel equal.

Mr. Potts, the groceryman with a bald head, blinked his eyes as he wiped his thick lensed glasses: "There's a lot of Niggers go up north and get high-falutin ideas--we don't want no smart Niggers hereabouts. You know where your place is?"

Frank asked himself if swallowing his pride was all the difficulty he was going to encounter--that wasn't too hard to do, and he was determined to succeed: "Yessuh."

It wasn't that he didn't have any choice--he could have avoided all of this. When he had written his mother near the

end of his fourth year at college that he was coming south, she had answered him pleadingly, begging him to stay in the North. He loved his mother very much--she had done so very much for him--but he felt that his duty was in the South and somehow he would always be a stranger to that cold northern land. Yes, his mother was responsible for his going to college. She was a slightly built woman of sixty with pale yellow coloring. Her face did not show her age--the only mark of age about her was her eyes. They seemed to be old and tired. She had been widowed fifteen years, and before Frank had gone north to college they had managed to live simply in a room over a garage--by her cooking for a doctor and his doing odd jobs after school. She had stayed behind when he went to college, and had even been able to send him a little money.

Mr. Russell said, "I don't know whether we ought to hire a Colored man who doesn't think his own state supplies adequate education."

However, Mr. Echols, the white school superintendent with whom Frank had first corresponded regarding the position, said, "Gentlemen, I think this is aside from the point; we have excellent references, and I don't think we are likely to get another man with the qualifications Johnson has."

The others agreed that since it didn't seem likely that Johnson would damage the community otherwise, it was in the interest of the education of the Colored community to appoint him to the school.

Not long afterward Frank had moved to Oak Hill with his

mother. She seemed almost cheerful in her activity of making their small house comfortable--although Frank sometimes felt that the cheerfulness was strained and unreal.

To the Negroes of Oak Hill he represented the arch-type of the educated man. He was called Professor. A plump jovial man who always had a smile for everybody, he seemed to radiate good-will. His face was very black and in great contrast to the pearly sparkle of his perfect teeth. He was principal of the Negro school, and he would have been superintendent if such job had existed. It wasn't the fault of Mr. Echols--he admired Johnson and would have had him bear that title--although it must be said that he came from a part of the State that had almost no Negroes, and he could hardly be called properly indoctrinated. It was whispered about town that he considered men a little too equal, but they overlooked it in view of the fact that he was a very good superintendent. Notwithstanding personal views of a few citizens, the majority (of the enfranchised) considered that Negroes were not capable of managing affairs of education, so Mr. Echols was also nominal head of the Negro school. The white newsboy who didn't discriminate between paying customers, had one of the best recommendations for Johnson that a newsboy can give--the Negro school teacher paid his paper bills on time.

Frank Johnson was an ideal Negro according to the standards set up by southern whites who believe segregation is the answer to the racial problem. He worked hard among the Negroes trying to educate them. He never ventured into the white part

of town except to the business district for necessary purchases and visits to the post office. He never stayed to loiter. If there was any discontent caused by his having lived in the North for four years, he never showed it. Although the better element among the whites was well pleased with the school teacher (they could not reasonably be otherwise and have any faith in what they claimed to believe about raising the Negro), there were those who were not so well-pleased with him. There are those among the whites who say, "When the Negroes have been properly educated, then we will give them political equality." But also there are those who have no education and no sense of justice who say that education is a dangerous thing in the hands of a Negro. Johnson's education soon branded him as far as this group was concerned. To them he represented a challenge to white supremacy. In fact, he was more than a challenge; he was walking evidence that they were not superior.

Among the men who felt a challenge in Johnson was one whose burning hate for Negroes had been there long before he had seen Johnson. In fact he had acquired that hatred so early that he thought he had been born with it. He was instilled with it before he was out of the cradle by his parents and by friends and the society around him as he grew to manhood. He was a little above the average in height with broad shoulders and a muscular neck. His hair was stiff and curly. A very little whiteness was visible on his forehead just under the hairline, but that whiteness soon melted into a fiery red that blazed across his face and neck down into his shirt. His nose was rather bulbous and a trifle redder than his face, if possible.

He worked for the county commissioner maintaining roads and repairing bridges. It was an exclusive type of work that employed no Negroes. He was paid on the sixteenth of the month. On pay day he gave his wife enough money to tease the grocer into extending his credit for another month, then treated himself to a binge. As invariably as he could not be found on the sixteenth, he could be found on the twentieth--broke. He would carefully count up the amount due to any of his creditors, then figure how much he would owe them at the end of the next fiscal month. At no time would most of his creditors turn down a settlement that would give them as much as twenty-five cents on the dollar. This superior type of man bore the name of Beckett.

Becket was self-appointed defender of the privileges of the whites against the inroads of the Negro race. He was very much disgusted with the lack of altruistic aims among the members of the merchant class. They allowed the Negroes to enter their business establishments through the front door when everybody knew that convention decreed that they should enter through the rear door. His favorite remark was, "Next thing you know they'll be coming in the front of the restaurants." The restaurants required the Negroes to enter through the back door and to eat in the back. If the right of belonging to a race that could enter through a door from which another race was excluded had been denied him, he would have found life hardly worth living. Finally (as he put it) he "cleaned the town up." He got Jake Fuller to come over from Fulton City to

help him. Jake had organized a small group and frightened all of the Negroes off the streets of the business district in his town. They had beaten up a couple of Negro men, and after that the rest used the rear entrances to the stores. With this experienced adjutant Becket recruited five of the local toughs and devoted several successive Saturday afternoons to making the streets "safe for white women." They patrolled the streets vigilantly and cleared them in one afternoon. To hear Becket talk you would have thought he was Stonewall Jackson describing one of his major victories. He thought that he, the general, had made a clean sweep. He gave no credit to the regiments of prejudices that backed him up. His statement of victory was: "We found the streets so crowded with stinking Niggers that a white woman couldn't pass. We left them clean and uncongested."

Johnson was an unpopular man with Becket because of his education, but what finally made that hate go far beyond the normal hate for a "Nigger" was the fact that Johnson saved enough money to buy a fairly new car. "What kind of a set-up is this where a big fat black Nigger can have a car and a hard-working honest white man can't?" It made Becket decide that it just wasn't possible for that kind of Negro to live in the same small town with him.

Occasionally Johnson had to drive over to the white school to pick up books. He always had trouble getting them and the ones he usually got were old ones discarded by the white school system. These books were constantly coming apart, making his problem more difficult. It was the Professor's habit to drive

down the back road to the school; however, the main street was the only paved road in the town, so when it rained, he found it much more convenient to drive down through the white business district. One day when he did this, it happened that the rain had kept Becket from his road work. He saw Johnson drive by on his way to the school house. His rage expanded in him and shaped itself into action. Becket turned to Tom Dickens who stood beside him watching the Negro school teacher drive by and said, "He'll be driving back by here pretty soon. Let's teach this black bastard that this is a white man's town."

Dickens, a sallow thin youth with a receding hairline, relishing the idea, brought his lethargic mind into action saying, "Old Judd is asleep in his office. I'll go in and borrow a couple of blackjacks. Hell, a city marshal ain't no good unless he protects the white citizens. Here he is sleeping while the Niggers take over the town. Seeing as to how he's not giving any protection, we'll just borrow his tools and do a little job for him."

After Dickens had returned and handed Becket one of the lead-filled leather skull crushers, the two stood waiting, looking from time to time up the deserted street. They had not long to wait. Johnson's green Chevrolet appeared over the rise in the street two blocks up from where they stood. The car was moving slowly, so the men did not step out into the street until it was almost abreast of them. Becket stepped into the center of the street and held up his hand. The unsuspecting Johnson stopped the car, and as Becket stepped around to the window

the Negro asked cordially, "Is the road being repaired?"

Becket turned to Dickens who had stepped around beside him: "This sunofabitching smutbutt thinks I'm fixing the road for him."

Becoming aware of the attitude of the men, Johnson asked nervously, "Can I do anything for you gentlemen?"

"You're goddam right you can, Nigger. Get out of that car," said Becket, at the same time jerking the car door open.

Johnson, noticing the rounded leather knobs in the hands of the two men as they took them out of the pockets of their light wind-breaker jackets, stepped quickly out of the car tensing his arms preparatory to warding off a blow. Outwardly calm now, he asked, "What do you want?"

The two men seemed to be waiting for something--perhaps for the action to start itself, and after a pause in which nothing happened, Becket fell back on words: "You Niggers are getting purty goddamned nervy when you start showing yourself off by driving up and down the street in a new car."

"But I had business up at the school--just ask Mr. Echols," said Johnson.

"A Nigger ain't got no business," snapped Becket.

"Here are the books I got--in the back seat," Johnson pleaded.

"You oughta be horsewhipped for taking books to Niggers," Dickens growled. As he spoke, Johnson's car, out of gear, began to roll. The movement of the car caused him to reach hurriedly for the emergency brake. The movement seemed to

release a tightly compressed spring in the two men, for they brought their arms sweeping down viciously in short arcs. The small heavy instruments thudded dully on bone, and the black man stretched out full-length beside the slowly rolling car. The two men paid no attention to the car but concentrated on the prostrate figure. They rained kicks with heavy shoes on the body and face of the helpless figure. In the space of a few seconds they had had their fill and turned away from the pulpy face that dripped blood on the pavement. The car gathered momentum as it followed the slope of the street away from the center until it smashed into a telephone pole.

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Somebody had set Becket and Dickens up to Cokes in Collins' Cash Grocery where loud guffaws were drifting out into the street. A slow moving Negro man issued from the store anxiously looking back over his shoulder to see if any of the recently given threats to him were in danger of being carried out. The owner of the grocery store, Collins, was proving his humane nature by sending out his clean-up boy to get Johnson out of the middle of the street. With eyes wide and handling the unconscious man gingerly, he pulled him over to the curb. He went to the car and backed it away from the telephone pole. After pulling Johnson into the car, he drove off toward Negro town.

******

The large yellow moon heralded by a soft yellow glow came edging up over the railroad embankment as Johnson sat in a rocking chair watching the spectacle that no longer gave him

joy. The beauty of nature was an anachronism. The world he'd been struggling so hard to create had crashed around his ears. There was no singing in the houses around him. It was always that way after the white man had shown his brutality. It killed their joy as his was killed now. Unconscious of his motion he rocked slowly back and forth on the small porch of his trim little white house. The dark head swathed in turban-like bandages seemed to be a man who belonged to India, not to America. The face no longer showed any joviality; it was a face of defeat. The jovial man had died that day.

As he sat rocking the point-blank glare of headlights darkened the lesser light of the moon-brightened night--a Ford coupe turned into the driveway and stopped. The lights of the car snapped off and the momentarily darkened surroundings brightened into a soft yellow glow--it was Mr. Echols. He came and stood silently by the porch steps. At last he spoke: "The constable says he doesn't approve of such things, but he's afraid to do anything with elections next month--he's afraid he'd get less votes if he arrested white men for beating up a Negro--I guess he's not much afraid of the Negro vote."

Frank had stopped rocking to listen--he fixed his gaze across the railroad embankment: "What'd he say about their using his weapons?"

"He was pretty hot about that--said he'd arrest them if it wasn't such a touchy case. I'm sorry I can't do any more about this--there are some who say I've done too much already. Don't worry about the doctor bill--I'll take care of that."

"Thanks."

"Good night."

"Good night."

As he resumed his rocking, a small woman came quietly through the screened door of the darkened house--it was his mother. Her face was so light it seemed to be yellow only from the reflection of the newly risen moon. When the moon had cleared the embankment and its rate of ascent seemed to slow, the woman spoke: "That Mr. Echols?"

"Yes."

"Do you think he can do anything?"

Johnson's voice was pervaded with an air of hopelessness when he answered: "No--he'd only lose his job if he tried."

"Isn't anybody going to do anything?"

"I don't think so."

Bitterly she said, "If there's any justice in this world, I don't know where it is."

He began slowly, "Yes, there's justice--but only for white men. Most of them don't approve of what happened today--like the superintendent--but most of them are afraid to be more than passive in their objection to it for fear of being branded a 'Nigger lover'. Those few that are so bitterly against us can keep a whole race in misery. I've struggled long for the Colored people and have borne much, but today was a defeat from which there is no recovery. We'll go to a Negro community. We can buy twenty or thirty acres over on Big Sandy Creek. The land is poor and sandy but it will grow sweet potatoes and peas!

The old woman nodded and muttered to herself: "I told him a long time ago--now he knows."

******

Frank Johnson spends his strength on sterile sandy soil. He manages to grow enough for him and his mother to eat and some of the bitterness has faded with the passage of time, but the joviality has never returned, nor the brightness to his eyes.

SHEPHERD UNDER THE ALE-STAKE

The morning sun flared in slatted patterns through the venetian blind on the bright pink walls of the hotel bar. The white, carved, flower-shaped light fixtures with their pistillate bulbs were sickly in a bright sunlight that could not nurture. The attempt at modernistic decoration was a thin shell--the room called out for subdued lighting to conceal the cheapness. The bartender slipped into a white jacket--a stocky man of a little less than average height, just past his thirtieth year. His face was a healthy ruddy, and the lines in his forehead bunched up when he thought--bunched up on a forehead broadened by a receding hairline.

Jimmy was just buttoning his jacket when he looked up to see Bernice coming in. It was the first of his flock--a flock that was always leaping the fence--girls losing their virginity --men being unfaithful to their wives--old men trying out their goat glands--maybe he should just open the gates and let them out, but there was still some hope.

Bernice's clothes bore the appearance of having been slept in. Her green tailored suit of gabardine was near black at the cuffs and down the sides of the V-neck. From the V a frilly blouse broke the dingy plainness of her suit with dirty white froth.

"Morning, Jimmy." Her greeting revealed protruding teeth with blackened ends.

"Good morning, Bernice--a hard night?" asked Jimmy solicitously, adjusting the broad knot of his flowery tie and

tilting up his strong chin, then looking down over it into the wall mirror across from the bar.

"You can say that again," said Bernice, breaking into a broad grin that revealed orange gums.

"What'll it be?"

"My usual breakfast."

"Bottle of Schlitz?"

"Right."

Reaching into the chipped ice, Jimmy pulled out an amber bottle and brushed off the cold clinging particles.

"Quite a party?"

"And how--really a wild bunch. One of the guys had an apartment over on Beacon. Damndest thing happened though. Remember that girl, Doris, who was in here yesterday? The one trying to play like she was a party girl--you could see she wasn't from a mile off. One of the other girls--a tough from South Boston--I don't usually go around with her--puts the grab on the kid's clothes and skips out before daylight this morning."

"So that's why your clothes look like they been slept in--you're afraid to get out of 'em," said Jimmy, grinning broadly.

"You won't catch me leaving my clothes around unless I know damned well they'll be there when I get ready for 'em," said Bernice.

"How'd the kid get home--in a barrel?"

"Naw--Gladys let her have her raincoat--after she put up security. Made her give her a dinner ring--a ruby with a bunch of small diamonds around it. Musta been worth four hundred

dollars or more. I guess she figures she can't afford to be generous like you. If you'da been there, I guess you'd have given her the shirt off your back--if I may crack a joke."

"You may, but it sure does smell--that Gladys is a good girl--just a little tight fisted," said Jimmy.

"Hey, there's old Creepy coming in--you'd better go steady his nerves for him," said Bernice as she took a healthy pull from her glass.

Jimmy poured a double rye on his way down to the other end of the bar. He pushed the drink across the bar to the watery-eyed alcoholic and watched him reach for it with trembling hands. Jimmy stood by waiting for the steadying effect of the drink--it was still interesting after months of seeing it. It was part of the interesting phenomena of life--interesting, but sad--it left a frustrated desire to help out a guy like that.

Bernice had put a paper-jacketed book on the bar. Jimmy looked at the title--Pavilion of Women. The book seemed to interest her very much--she read for a few minutes, then looked over the book off into space--seeming to contemplate what she had just read. Occasionally she picked at her upper lip--pulling off small strips of lipstick encrusted skin.

Creepy's nerves seemed settled. Jimmy tired of watching Bernice and walked the length of the outer end of the U-shaped bar where she sat: "Interesting?"

"Sure. You know--I wouldn't know what to do with myself if it wasn't for reading. It opens a complete new world for me. When I was in school, I used to think about how I was

going out and see the world--well, things just didn't work out that way. I wasn't cut out for this kind of life--sometimes it bores me to tears. In books I can go to China, Tibet, Egypt--take a tour in lands that are far away. It's wonderful--I can live the life I want to lead--travel the places I want to go."

"None of that travelling for me--not even in books. All I want is this life right here around me. That's the life we all oughta think about and look into. Why skim any more surfaces? Let's dig into the ones around us. I've seen all of those far away places I wanted to see with the army in North Africa and France. Just give me common old ordinary Boston--just the old familiar places. Say, what'd you say that kid's name was that was with you?"

"I don't know what her last name was--first name's Doris, but God, she was green. You could see that yesterday when she was trying to pick that big bookie up in here--what's his name?"

"Oldfield."

"Yea, that's the one--I was out with him once--several months ago, but I couldn't remember his name. He wouldn't fall for the bait--guess he figured she was San Quentin Quail."

"Who'd she finally land?" asked Jimmy.

"An egg-pate in his dangerous forties--probably surprised as hell when he found out he wasn't going to have to pay--boy, she was really plastered when we left the Top Hat."

"What's eating the kid any way?"

"Didn't get the man she was in love with. She met a guy

from out in Ohio when he was a soldier and she was a USO hostess here in town. He was a sergeant--Sergeant Joe something or other--she kept calling this guy last night Joe--he didn't like it worth a damn, but he figured, 'What the hell--she's plastered,' and by that time he was drooling at the mouth--he was so worked up by that time he woulda let her--well, you know what I mean, Jimmy. After this guy Joe comes back from overseas they were going to get married. The kid's old man works for a big national concern, so he had their representative out in Ohio check up on his family. The result wasn't so good--seems the old man was president of a bank that went busted a good many years back and he did ten years in the pen for not being able to explain where the money went to. Doris loved the guy and was all for marrying him anyway, even though he hadn't told her his old man had done time--but the folks said no. They laid down the law and she obeyed it. She musta taken me back to the john in the Top Hat four times to tell me all about it."

Jimmy said, "I bet she's trying to get back at them now, or else she's punishing herself for not standing by him--I guess she's pretty bitter."

"She sure is."

"Maybe she'll get over it after last night," said Jimmy.

"I don't know, Jimmy--she was acting like a confirmed hellcat last I saw her--cussing that girl that took her clothes. She used words I don't ever use."

"She looked like a good kid--I think she'll come through.

A girl like that gets a helping hand she'll be o.k. It's when they're down and somebody puts their feet in the small of their back that keeps 'em down."

"When things are blackest, you can always find a glimmer of light--can't you, Jimmy? How about scheming me into virginity and an expenses paid tour of the world? Don't look so glum--I was only kidding--I think it's grand the way you like to help people."

Business was at the usual slow morning pace. Jimmy started polishing glasses, and Bernice resumed the slow digestion of her other world.

II

It was after lunch--hash, peas, and a bottle of milk sent up from the hotel kitchen--and Jimmy was waiting for the afternoon crowd to come in. Only two people were in the bar--plainclothesman Murphy of the police force and Creepy, still there from his morning appearance, looking happier than he was earlier in the day. The door swung open and Sam Oldfield came in. Sam was wearing a gray pin stripe suit and a very bright spring tie. Soon afterward Fritz Weser came in from the other door and waddled over to where Oldfield sat. Fritz had a red round face and wore a black hat with the brim turned down all the way round. He was sixty-five and carried a racing form. He began to speak hurriedly to the bookie--his broad white moustache waving furiously over the closing and unclosing red cavern of his mouth. Jimmy fitted him into his groove of a man who had made money in a brewery and retired--he remarked

to himself on the resemblance this man bore to his mental picture of a Gestapo agent. Jimmy poured two of Scotch; the two men took the drinks and retreated from the bar to the long cushioned seat along the window. Two girls came in and sat at the bottom of the U. One of them was tall with long sleek hair, full lips, and provocative eyes; the other was a dingy blonde with plain features and a dumpy figure. "A good looking girl always has a bag with her," said Jimmy to himself. Vic Slater came in looking small and thin in spite of his coat with shoulders--his head very small under a wide brimmed hat. "He'll have something smart to say--I wonder when he sells shoes, he always seems to be in here."

At three the McCarthys came. Jimmy saw them irregularly. They weren't regular customers. Jimmy knew that John McCarthy was an engineer of some kind--they seemed to be respectable people--just liked to get out from under the grind of respectability and sober living. It wasn't often that John and Kate McCarthy chose to celebrate, but when they did, what a party! John looked much younger than his forty-four years and was aware of it. Kate showed a marked effort in the direction of achieving the same look--and succeeded to the extent of making her forty-two years look a young forty-two. She was somewhat poured into a dressy black dress. After the usual greeting John said, "Start setting 'em up, we're celebrating our twenty-second anniversary."

Jimmy surveyed the scene--it was beginning to teem with life. He was the master of it all--it was his own small world.

The conversations of the various groups drifted over to him. None of the groups knew what the others were talking about, but Jimmy knew what all were talking about: "A ten spot on Greyhound in the fifth," "I think the Sox'll be bouncing back today after the trouncing yesterday." "I like a man with big shoulders." "I guess we've done as well as anybody with our family--a boy finishing high school and about the sweetest grown-up daughter there ever was." It was as if all of their lives were partially under his direction.

Jimmy saw two students coming in--they were regulars--splurged twice a week on a couple of beers. The tall one with narrow shoulders set his brief case against the bar at his feet. They exchanged friendly greetings with Jimmy, who reached unbidden for the ice cold beer in anticipation of what their pleasure would be.

Shortly after the students came Gladys. Gladys was blonde, near-goodlooking, and over-dressed. "Where's Bernice?" she asked.

"I think she's taking in a movie," Jimmy replied.

Gladys sat down by John McCarthy, and before she could order he asked, "What'll you have, lady? We're celebrating."

"I'll have an old-fashioned."

"That's a nice looking pair of boys there, Jimmy," he said nodding toward the young rosy faced students, "Bring 'em another beer."

Jimmy set the colorful drink in front of Gladys, then confronted the two students with beers. They looked up--

Jimmy waved one of the beer bottles in the direction of the McCarthys. The students raised their glasses in acknowledgement. A slight suggestion of a smile lingered on their faces for a moment then faded away as they quickly returned to their discussion of the potentialities of the drama as a political weapon.

Jimmy looked at the various drinks ranged along the bar and enjoyed the variegated effect of the many colors and shapes. Did the type of drink have anything to do with the type of person sitting behind it?

Gladys turned to the McCarthys and raised her glass: "May you have many more years of happy wedded life."

It occurred to Jimmy that wasn't the best source of blessings on marital life--from a prostitute, but no matter, it was as good as many another they had received, and probably more sincere than many.

"Thanks," said the McCarthys in unison.

"Kate, look at those two girls over there," said John, pointing to the sleek-haired girl and her companion, both of whom half-faced them around the corner of the bar.

"Yes, the one on this side is quite attractive--looks something like Doris. She has the same dark hair--it hangs so sophisticated down on her shoulders. She doesn't act very nice though--she's been trying to pick up that man right across from us. He looks like he's uncomfortable--wants to be picked up by such a sharp looker, but remembers his wife at home and is trying to stand up under this shameless creature's gaze. It's

perfectly awful the way she is acting."

Jimmy said, "Aw, she's not bad--a pretty good kid."

"Well, I'm sure glad our Doris doesn't like to hang out around bars," said John.

"Too bad they can't find something better to do," said Kate. After a pause she said, "I hope Doris is having a good time in Framingham."

"She's bound to be--that Dowd girl is nice," said John.

"You think she's over--that--you know what?"

"Sure, Doris is a sensible girl--she wouldn't brood over a thing like that--she realizes we know what's best for her. Just think of the war marriages that have gone on the rocks for not being careful enough. It's not many people that have as dutiful daughter as we have."

To Jimmy it seemed that that was the way it always was. The daughter was being dutiful--off somewhere being nice. The two girls there--their parents probably thought they were at a tea somewhere. Jimmy made the rounds supplying new drinks where needed. The two girls wanted two more pink ladies. Murphy wanted a double shot of bourbon. He was either trying to build up his resistance to the glamour girl or tear it down. Creepy had slowed down considerably--half of his last drink was still left. Jimmy moved back toward the McCarthys. As he neared them he heard John say, "Look at this ring--it's just like the one Doris has."

Jimmy recalled the morning conversation with Bernice and hoped Gladys didn't give anything away. It wasn't very likely--

Gladys wasn't so obvious about her trade as Bernice was. Lots of Dorises--probably wasn't the same one, but she did look a lot like Kate--only younger, slimmer, and a lot prettier. They said she was in Framingham--yes, and the two girls at the bar were supposed to be at a tea.

"It is that," said Kate.

"Oh, this?" said Gladys, holding out the hand with the dinner ring with a ruby set in diamonds. "This isn't mine. Belongs to a girl who was out on a party with me last night. I didn't know her very well, but it was raining so when we decided to call it a night I had her come stay over at my place--she lives quite a way out of Boston. This morning I let her borrow my raincoat, and she insisted on leaving this ring--of course I wasn't worried about the coat at all and wouldn't think of letting her leave it, but she kept insisting. She was a nice kid and said she'd meet me here at four and bring the coat back--I don't know why she insisted on leaving such an expensive ring."

"I'd say that was quite a bit of security for a rain coat," remarked Kate.

"What time is it, Jimmy?" asked Gladys.

"Ten to four." Jimmy walked to the back of the bar and picked up the telephone. "Hello, Ruth? This is Jimmy." As he spoke he kept his voice below the murmur of the voices around the bar. "Call me back in just a few minutes--when Gladys comes out of the bar, stop her at the switchboard and have her call me from in there--never mind why." Jimmy busied himself about

the bar. He wiped up the dampness along the dark-brown surface, then he prepared a couple of more drinks. The telephone rang. He listened for a few seconds and went over to the bar. "Gladys that was Bernice. She says there are a couple of old friends in her room--would you mind coming up?"

"I'll go up in just a few minutes--as soon as that kid brings my coat."

"I'll take care of that," said Jimmy.

"But"--the protest died on her lips, for she saw the very particular look that Jimmy was giving her: "Sure, Jimmy." She slipped the ring off her finger. Handing it to Jimmy, she went out. Jimmy dropped the ring into the outer pocket of his bar jacket.

Shortly the phone rang again. "Gladys, keep the hell outta here. I think it's the kid's folks. I'll call up to your room when you can come back."

Jimmy had just hung up the phone when the door swung open and Doris walked in. Fortunately the McCarthys had their back to the door as she entered. She had just started to say something to Jimmy when she recognized them. She was momentarily startled, but even so, Jimmy, noticing the quick recovery, thought it pretty smooth. "Hi," she said. "You two out celebrating I see--happy anniversary. I just got off at the Back Bay station--thought I'd walk over by the Public Library to get a book, and who should I see through the window but you."

As Kate and John turned, Jimmy had a feeling that there was suspicion in the air--Kate's eye caught the raincoat on

Doris's arm. "Thank God she's got gloves," he thought. He could see Doris was on her toes. After they had greeted her, she noticed her mother's continued interest in the raincoat: "Oh, this--it belongs to Betty Dowd." Jimmy breathed more easily--this Doris was a clever liar.

"What'll you have to help us celebrate?" asked John.

"I'll have a bourbon and ginger--a short one."

Jimmy reached for the whiskey--it was straight shots of Scotch yesterday. As he poured the drink he saw Kate looking at Doris's right hand. The old girl was still suspicious. She wanted to see Doris's hand when she took off the glove. She could say she let this Betty wear it. It would be better if she had it though--they'd be likely to be suspicious and call Betty--then the cat would be out of the bag. Jimmy slipped the ring out of his pocket as he reached for the colored napkin to set out with the drink. He slid the ring between the folds of the napkin, and as he drew his left hand away from the napkin, he turned the corner away from Kate and John up so the ring could be seen by Doris and not by them. Jimmy reached well across the bar between John and his daughter, wiping the edge of the bar, and when he brought his arm away, Doris's hand was stripped of its white glove and the ruby sparkled blood red in the afternoon sun that streamed through the plate glass window.

Jimmy was relieved--being the director of people's lives was no easy matter. Maybe this was all wrong--the girl seemed to be almost too smooth an operator to need his help--what the

hell though--there might be a chance she was o.k.--she had had quite a rough time.

The telephone rang again. Somebody wanted Oldfield--he had left some time ago--Jimmy didn't remember exactly when--he'd better have Gladys come back--it would clear the atmosphere a little more--he thought he could depend on Doris not to show any signs of recognition. "Hello, Gladys?--the kid's still here but come on down any way--I slipped her the ring--don't show you know her."

It was only a few minutes before Gladys came through the door opening into the hotel and sat down by Kate. Jimmy said, "That girl called and said she couldn't make it in to town today--she'll bring the coat in tomorrow."

"Keep the ring, Jimmy--I'm going out to the races tomorrow--you can give it to her."

The McCarthys had lost their holiday spirit. After finishing their drinks the three of them rose to go: "So long Jimmy," said John.

"See you again," said Kate. Doris looked appreciation and said nothing.

"'Bye," said Jimmy.

As they went out the door Doris said, "Oops, I forgot my purse." She cameback in and took it off the bar stool. In a low hurried voice she said, "Thanks for everything, I won't forget it. I'll bring the coat in as soon as I can. You don't know what this means--there won't be any more of that." There were tears in her voice that were quickly rising to her eyes--

to the point of flowing over. She turned and fled through the door.

"Why do you bother?" asked Gladys. "It's no skin off your nose."

Jimmy started to say something about the world of his bar and his people, but thought better of it--Gladys wouldn't understand: "Just don't like to see people stepped on when they're down, I guess."

BACKGROUND OF A BUREAUCRAT

The "cotton-pore" farmers of the cotton belt have done a great deal to cut down on their spare time by raising livestock. The care of the animals has made awful inroads into what used to be a farmer's vacation without pay--and often without food--of some five months. For five months dominoes and checkers flourished in every gin office and blacksmith shop throughout the cotton country. When there was so much time on hand there was a goodly portion of the fireside time apportioned to talk. These sessions produced some mighty fine talkers, and they had a right smart of recognition--a man just had to be a good tale teller before he was allowed to take the floor. Diversification has done very well in many ways, but it has just barely left enough time for dominoes--a sad day for tale tellers. Cows, pigs, and sheep, unlike cotton, must be tended both winter and summer. Notwithstanding the handicaps, if you keep your ears peeled around the southern centers of winter congregation, you will now and then hear some fair tales and reminiscences.

It was a cold clear day in December in El Dorado, Texas--don't rush off looking for the Atlas: you won't find it--don't write a letter to the chamber of commerce: there is no post office. It consists mainly of a gin and small store and in its entirety--with the addition of Dave Dabney's house--that individual being proprietor of both business establishments. Long being Dave's practice to let his wife run the store and run the cotton gin himself, it would be best to go over to the

gin office to find Dave. The office has a weighing platform beside it and a roaring fire inside it. Before we go on--for the uninitiated--December is no great season for ginning cotton. That pot-bellied stove glows red--not to keep the weigher's fingers warm enough to manipulate the scales but to keep a group of sedentary farmers warm enough to concentrate on twenty-eight rectangular bones. From all appearances we're too late to see a game. The foursome is breaking up. Clay Copley, being the most eager stockman there, has drawn away from the table, put on a sheepskin lined coat and stepped out into the cold that with the aid of a driving north wind chills the marrow of your bones. Jake Tarver nearly stepped out too, but the blast of cold air that Clay let in caused him to pull his chair up to the fire. True, Jake had four cows, but it wouldn't be the first time Bessie, his wife, had milked them. Levi Stevens was too ornery to have any livestock. Levi's motto was "I'm always open to conviction, but dern anybody what tries to convince me." Levi wasn't having any diversified farming because the New Deal government had advocated it so strongly. Levi was one of the rugged individuals who wouldn't take any regulation of his crops. He wouldn't sign up, got less money for his cotton and planted twenty per cent more cotton the year the government started its crop control program.

The fire roared in competition with the wind outside. The south skimming December sun was in danger of being sucked under the southwestern horizon. Dave Dabney had an audience, a warm room, and no domino game; there wasn't anything that would have

kept him quiet unless it was an agent from an oil company wanting to drill a well on the gin lot (which Dave owned).

"They say young Jim Thompson's up there in Washington working for the Department of Agriculture, and I ain't a bit surprised myself," said Dave, tearing off a chew of tobacco from a plug of Brown Mule. "You know he was always a great one for sta-tistics."

A look of pleasure passed over the faces of Levi and Jake--the Department of Agriculture was a subject near and dear to their hearts, particularly when its shortcomings were mentioned. Dave paused, waiting for the two men to prime him on his subject. They knew Dave wouldn't keep quiet after he once got started, but they knew one or the other must go through the motions.

"What does that boy know about sta-tistics?" asked Jake.

"Well, I was workin for Jim Thompson back in '34--made half a bale to the acre on that bottom place of his'n. 'Twas a mighty fine piece of land too--in them days. Course that Jed Brown done since let it grow up in Johnson grass, but that's no matter of mine--I guess Jim knows what to do with his own land. Jim, he'd have that boy sorta half way workin round the place--just to learn about farming mostly--not hopin to get much work outten him--he was just a little shaver; not big enough to do no real work--reckon he warn't over eight year old. His daddy musta been purty proud of him cause he sure learned a lot of things quick. Course a lot of the things he just learned to talk about--but he could sure talk a good crop,

or almost anything about the farm that you'd light on. I'd sorta draw him out, so he liked to pick cotton alongside o' me, if we was pickin cotton and if it was hoeing we was doin, he'd have his row next to mine. I'd say, 'Jim how about runnin some shorthorns in the creek pasture?'

"He'd say, 'Now, Dave, you know that a shorthorn is a dual purpose animule--what we need is a beef breed in there. To get the full benefit out of the shorthorns you oughta milk 'em too, and you know that creek pasture's too far to be going to, to milk regular. What we need is Herefords or Anguses. Course an Angus is mighty 'sceptible to disease and that heavy black soil is likely to give 'em some disease or other, so I reckon as to how Herefords are the best bet. 'Twouldn't hurt none to mix in a little Brahma blood to make 'em more resistant to disease.'

"I'd say, 'I reckon yore right.' Or maybe it ud be about cotton: 'How about plantin some Sea Island cotton, Jim?--that long staple is what gets the price.'

"He'd say, 'Well, that's mighty right about the staple, but that Sea Island cotton--she won't do too well nowheres 'cept on the coast. For this part of the country you can't beat Harper's Mebane.'

"And I'd say, 'Well say now, I reckon yore right--sure as shootin.'

"But I seen young Jim keep quiet for nigh on to a week once. Young Jim and me was riding one Saturday on top of a bale of cotton his daddy was a taking to the gin on his trailer.

There's a feller walking down the road so we stops and picks him up. Course I knows it's Frank Grice, but I guess Jim didn't know him--'cept by repute. Frank had been back up toward our place to look at some yearlings he had in his pasture and was goin to town--his pasture's the other side a his house from town so we goes right by it. Frank, bein a right playful fellow--and not knowin but what young Jim knows him, says, 'You know this feller Grice that lives in the bungalow there?'

"Jim was a purty good youngster for puttin two and two together, so if he had any doubts as to whether this was Frank Grice or not, that settled it for him: 'Sure do--we call his family the window-peepers--ever time we go by they all run to the windows and doors and look out to see who's goin by. I reckon old man Grice must have fifteen kids. There's a new one ever year--I reckon if he has any more they'll have to start lookin out the chimney.'

"Of course all the time I'm scrootchin up my face and noddin in the direction of Frank from behind him, but Jim's so bent on sayin his say there warn't no stoppin him. Poor old Frank was a turnin all colors a the rainbow. When we get to town, Frank gets off and we was a goin down to the gin. Jim says, 'Who was that feller?--he sure was quiet.' When I told him he turned sorta green around the gills. For about a week Jim was a mighty quiet boy--seemed to a been a thinkin all that time, but then he started out strong as ever--didn't seem to a done him a bit of good. Only time I could get him to quit being so pos-tiv about what he was a tellin me ud be when we'd

go by Frank Grice's house. Jim ud be tellin me about how much better soy beans is than black eyed peas--then I'd look over to Grice's house and say, 'You know this feller Grice that lives over there?' The next thing I'd know he'd be saying something that wasn't just somethin he'd heard somebody else say. He'd say, 'Well, I guess it depends which a feller can make the best use of--black-eyed peas are sure mighty fine eatin and I ain't found a one of the hundred ways of fixin soy beans that I like.'

"If'n that boy embarrasses people in Washington like he done Frank Grice, they're likely to be makin him a judge to get him outta their hair. I reckon Jim'll talk about the best agriculture of anybody in the department--I guess he'll fit in purty well--they all seem to be long on the talkin end of farmin up there."

Levi said, "Yep, he'll sure make a good un for em."

Jake noticed the sun had just slipped out of sight: "I'd better be skidoodling."

Levi and Jake hurried down the road as Dave locked the door and started over to the store.

THE PREACHER GETS A SUBSIDY

George Barnes shook the article in the Blackland Times Herald under the nose of his fellow deputy sheriff, Joe Cook: "It's a damned lie; there ain't an honest-to-goodness share-cropper in the whole county."

Joe, who was reclining on a worn leather couch, looked up at the paper: "Landlords forced to return government checks to tenant farmers," he read. Turning his head to the side so he could see the tall wiry man who was hunched over in a cane bottomed chair with his elbows on his knees, he commented drily, "Well, if they ain't givin the money to nobody in particular, I guess we'd better'd go over and get some of it."

"'Tain't what I mean--somebody's gettin it right enough--but they ain't regular share-croppers--all the good share-croppers got thrown off their places when the new government program came in."

"Maybe you're the only one that thinks that," said Joe. "Couldn't be just because you couldn't get a place no more."

"You're dern tootin I couldn't get a place--not on honest terms, leastwise. They all wanted me to agree to turn over my share of the money for plantin soil-building crops. I don't care for sheriffing none much, and I'd tell you right now that I'd go back to farming if I could get a place on a fair trade."

"Why, I heard old man Whittacker said he'd let you eat all the black-eyed peas you wanted--all he wanted was the nitrogen they put in the soil and the government check."

"That old man's as crooked as a snake--the law says plain

as the nose on your face that the tenant gets his share," said George warmly.

"Well, he found somebody else that was willing enough."

"Ain't none of these new men no good--a lot of the owners that turned off the old share-croppers are finding it out now."

"Didn't they make a trade with their new men before they came on their places?"

"Sure they did, but this new gang don't give a tinker's damn for trades or nothin else. When they found out that the owners didn't have a legal leg to stand on about these checks, their new croppers lit into em tooth and nail to get the money back."

"I guess the owners'll want to get rid of these men that are forcin them to cough up the money--how you gonna feel about throwing men of your own callin off?"

George's angular face, still bronzed from his long summer days in the field, turned thoughtful: "I guess I'd feel purty bad if they was still my kinda folks--but none of us ud had to be thrown off--we got off of a place on the first of January if we didn't make a trade just like there was the plague on it."

The room was warm although the small box-like gas heater had been turned off. Joe yawned and stretched his arms: "The Sheriff's gonna be back at three--let's go get a cuppa coffee before he gets back--I need somethin to wake me up."

As George and Joe came back from Ann's Place across the street they were met by the sheriff at the door. Sheriff Copeland in his usually friendly tone said, "George, you and

Joe take the Ford pick-up and go over to Tom Whittacker's Jackson Creek farm and evict a Nigger tenant--just throw his stuff on the back and dump it down in Niggertown."

The two men climbed into the Ford with George behind the wheel, and were soon tearing along the rough country road at a forty mile-an-hour clip.

"You know the place?" asked Joe in a voice loud enough to out-clamour the squeaks and rattles caused by the rock hard clods strewn over the road.

"That's the place of his I was on," said George.

"If there's anything I hate to do it's evict Niggers," said Joe. "I can see how a white man'd have the cheek to try to stay on--but a Nigger; he knows the law ain't gonna fool around none with him. I guess Tom Whittacker had to fork up some government money to this Nigger and wouldn't be turrible unhappy if we shot him in the process of evicting him."

George laughed: "I guess old Tom's somewhat upset over losing me. He's right--I woulda stood on my rights and not given him the money that was my due, but I sure wouldn't a lied to him about not taking the check, then made him fork it over--nor refused to move when he wouldn't make a trade. It serves him right, but I still ain't got no sympathy for these new share croppers--and it ain't just cause this one's a Nigger--I've seen some mighty good Nigger share croppers in my time--some you could have quite a time with--fishing and possum hunting, but still knew their place. What's this Nigger's name?"

Joe looked on the eviction paper: "Says Lum Hudson. Seems

to me I know him--sort of a tall lank crazy looking Nigger. Caught him and about a dozen others in a crap game. Said we couldn't arrest him; he was the militant angel of the Lord come to teach these sinners the evils of gambling. He didn't have a pistol or a frog sticker on him, but he got fined fourteen dollars and seventy cents and spent the night in the cooler just like the rest."

The eight miles to the Whittacker place was soon covered. The tin roofed, unpainted house stood seventy-five feet from the road. Down the hill from the house a narrow path led through a patch of winter whitened bloodweed stalks--then a group of small sparse limbed elm trees clustered around a privy. The trail continued on from the privy to a small barn where an old cow of near-white coloring pulled stalks of row feed from a fodder stack. On the other side of the house a barren field sloped downward. George stopped the Ford in the road because the sides of the road had just been graded and the bridge to the house still rested on the opposite side where it had been pulled out of the grader's reach. The two men casually loosened their revolvers in their holsters as they stepped out of the Ford. George walked around the front of the truck and they started toward the house. As they started out of the ditch, Joe yelled "Look out," at the same time forcing George down into the ditch--just in time--the scattering pellets of a shot-gun shell rattled against the side of the vehicle behind them.

Both men's revolvers had appeared as if by some sleight-of-hand trick: "It was the militant angel all right," said Joe.

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He edged up toward the rim of the ditch, his pistol before him.

"Better stay down," said George. "That's Whittacker's cotton seed store room--the Nigger's probably got the walls lined with sacks of cotton seed--a bullet'd never go through. I got an idea. There's a gully that's eaten its way nearly up behind the house where there ain't no windows. I'll sneak down the ditch here, get in the gully and come up behind the house--then I'll edge around the corner and be in the house with the drop on him before he knows what's happened. Talk to him and play like I'm right here with you."

Joe nodded and George was off down the ditch--sometimes on all fours and sometimes on his belly--depending on the depth of the ditch.

"We didn't come to arrest you--just to put you off the place," said Joe. "If you come out without any more trouble, we won't hold what you've already done against you. We'll haul all your stuff into town for you and drop it off anywhere you want to go."

"Ain't gwine uh do no good to talk--I'se heah and heah I'se gwine to stay--y'all just get away from here and don't meddle wif me."

"You're a preacher, ain'tcha? What's the Bible say about covetin another man's property? You know this land belongs to Mr. Whittacker, and he don't want you on it."

"Mistuh Whittacker done told me I could stay two yeahs when I come heah."

"You didn't keep your promise to him, so how do you expect

him to keep his'n to you?"

"De Lawd told me it were crooked to let him have the money the guv'ment says is mine--he spoke an told me not to break Cesuh's law. Besides--ain't Mr. Whittacker done said two yeahs? I'se made arrangements wif the Holy Name of the Saviour Church down at the forks of the creek to preach Sundays for this comin yeah. They just ain't no sep'ratin me from my flock--I'se heah to stay, I is."

"Somebody's goin to get you out o there sooner or later--might as well be now."

"I'se heah to stay, I is."

"We'll get tear gas, and then you'll come out."

"I'se heah to stay, I is, praise de Lawd."

"You might get hurt."

"I'se heah---"

The sharp crack of a pistol followed closely by the booming of the shotgun rang out in the mild quiet January afternoon. Joe leaped out of the ditch and was at the window in a flash, prepared for anything. George stood in the doorway across the room, his pistol raised and still smoking. The room was filled with smoke and smelled strongly of burned powder. Joe could make out a crumpled figure on the floor. By the time he had walked around the house and into the room the smoke had lifted. The Negro could be plainly seen--a rusty single barrelled shotgun still clutched in his hand, his finger still pressed against the trigger. There was a tinge of grey in his hair at the temples.. His thin lined face looked small and far away in

death.

"I didn't want to shoot him," said George, "But he tried--"

"I know," said Joe--he could see the small thirty-eight hole in the dead man's forehead.

"I don't like to shoot anybody--even a Nigger."

"It ain't your fault, George."

"Damn the day the government ever run me off my place."

"If you'da still been here, this wouldn't of happened--and if that skinflint, Whittacker, hadn't been dishonest it wouldn't of either--it sure wasn't this crazy preacher's fault."

An Abstract of Viable Seed

The "viable seed" sown in this collection have not fallen on fertile soil, nor entirely on sterile. In "Shepherd Under the Ale-Stake" we get a hardy plant thriving in a very rocky crevice, but no less fascinating for its drab setting. "The Flame That Died" and "With His Shield" show admirable efforts, but the environment and the unkind elements are too much for the protagonists--their defeats are through no faults of their own. "The Preacher Gets a Subsidy" is also a story of men in hopeless struggle against a mammoth--"progress" or personal greed, both strong enough to destroy those who are helpless under its power. "Background of a Bureaucrat" is the plant of rank growth, fruitless but interesting as a specimen.

The collection concerns itself chiefly with the germ of character. This theme is carried out in five short stories against two backgrounds--that of metropolitan Boston in "Shepherd Under the Ale-Stake" and the cotton producing district of Central Texas in the others.

The return of the fighting man is a theme of current interest--drama that is being lived at this very moment. Some of the things that happen to him on his return puzzle him and in some cases his reaction puzzles others. What does he expect to find? What did he think he left? What did he really leave? Has what he thought he left divested itself of its sham in his absence and stands revealed on his return? Or perhaps he has built up a vision of an Arcadian paradise of what in reality is a share-cropper's unpainted hovel on the edge of a cotton

field. Who can understand the dismay of the man who cannot find his Arcadia? At most we can speculate.

In "With His Shield" we find Joe Powers, veteran of the war in Europe where he skimmed across the continent in continuous contact with the ground as an infantryman, returning to a land of a cotton economy and mixed races--mixed more than he knows. In twenty-four hours Joe loses an illusion that survived months of the most trying conditions. The breaking of his spirit is the central theme of the story.

"The Flame That Died" is also the breaking of a spirit. In addition to character portrayal, this story tries to create fully the "human climate" and the general surroundings because of its close tie-in with the defeat of the protagonist. It is the story of David and Goliath, only this time the David is not fully aware of Goliath's proportions. Perhaps he is vaguely aware, but refuses to let the figure impress itself on his brain. Frank Johnson, a Negro school teacher, confronts ignorant intolerance, only to have his spirit broken. The event is an old tragedy--that of the early unlettered Roman's mastery of the cultured Greek, the barbaric Goth's mastery of the cultured Roman--with one exception--in this case the barbarian is not aware of anything to be gained as his earlier prototype was. To call the story straight art would be an attempt to conceal the obvious; let us call it a problem short story.

"Shepherd Under the Ale-Stake" is the presentation of a common man of modern life in a somewhat brutalizing atmosphere who is not brutalized. He maintains a faith in humanity that

is probably not justified by the ultimate outcome of most people's actions. But the light that is within the man burns all the brighter for its rarity. The shepherd is the bar-tender, Jimmy. He endeavors to guide the people in his bar. He feels an undelegated responsibility; he is his brother's keeper of his own choice. In the story the drama of an episode in the life of one of our misguided daughters flits sadly by.

"Background of a Bureaucrat" is the aftermath of the shaping of a young man's character during the intense crusading days of the New Deal agricultural experiment, the Agricultural Adjustment Administration. Jim Thompson would have been heard from anywhere at any time, but how appropriate that he could be conditioned for the bureaucracy in its hey-day. The men engaged in telling and listening to the story are representative of a large number of farmers who have always been too individualistic to see eye to eye with a system of regulation no matter what the over-all result.

"The Preacher Gets a Subsidy" is the tragedy of good intentions going astray. The government program is intended to benefit agriculture, and deprives a number of competent tenant farmers of their farms. George Barnes has no deep-seated animosities toward Negroes, but fate has placed him where animosities are expected of him. An elderly Negro man, somewhat "tetched in the haid" is the victim of circumstances beyond his control. He is puzzled by a life which becomes too complex for him to understand, coupled with the actions of his money-grabbing landlord. The final result is the accumulated

result of governmental folly, monetary greed, and the helpless action of men in a trap--the Negro and the two deputies who come to evict him.

The over-all picture of the collection is one of uneven writing and a lack of creating fully, although what does appear is of value or suggests something of value. The last two stories--"Background of a Bureaucrat" and "The Preacher Gets a Subsidy"--fall into the classification of short short stories although lacking some of the tucking in of loose ends that are essential to that super-economical form.

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